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SLAVERY IN MISSISSIPPI

It has been nearly half a century since slavery ceased to exist in the United States. We are now standing in the light of the twentieth century, where we can look back over events not so close to our vision that we cannot see them in clear perspective and consider them with unbiased judgment. Yet, when we view a period of past history, like the one under consideration, it is difficult to reproduce in imagination the social and economic conditions of the time, the general attitude of the people toward the negro's ability and station in life, the increase in wealth due to his labor and the consequent effect upon the planter and slave, together with the growing difficulties of emancipation.

Thus in taking Mississippi as a type of the far southern state, possessing a soil and climate not only peculiarly fitted to slave labor but almost excluding white labor from agricultural pursuits, we must so far as possible seek to learn the attitude of her people toward an institution, which, when she became a territory of the United States in 1798, was already wrought into the very fibre of her being.

History points us back to the day when the first colony was planted on Mississippi ground before the French had learned to look to the soil for subsistence. Iberville, the founder, was instructed "to breed the buffalo at Boloxi; to seek for pearls; to examine the wild mulberry with the view to silk, the timber for ship-building, and to seek for mines."¹ Nothing was said about planting grain. A few years later, when Bienville was appointed governor, he insisted that the supplies of the colony should be made on the rich soil it possessed. "But it was impossible to make the French work, and many of the Indians whom they had subjected deserted to their own villages. He proposed to send Indians to the West Indies and exchange them for slaves. This the minister pronounced impracticable and

¹ Mississippi as a Province, Territory and State, by J. F. H. Claiborne, p. 27.

recommended a direct importation from Africa. This is the first suggestion of African slavery in the history of the territory." In 1720 the first cargo from Africa was imported.

Thus we have slavery early incorporated into the life of the settlers. And as year by year the tobacco, indigo, and cotton returns held out bright promise of success, slaveholders from Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee travelled in wagons to this fertile region of the Mississippi basin. Lands were procured with but little trouble and expense. The immigrant had but to obtain an order from the governor for a piece of the central table-land covered with rich loam, or, more preferable still, a section of the alluvium-covered bottom lands. If no obstacle prevented, the grant was issued for a small fee sufficient to pay the surveyor. These lowlands of the Mississippi and Yazoo, the Tombigbee, Big Black, and the Pearl covered an area of over one-sixth of the entire state and offered unrivalled soil and the advantages of easy exportation. Of this region, the Mississippi-Yazoo Delta, aptly termed "the cream jug of the continent," occupies the greater part.

Various inventions, increasing tremendously the demand for cotton, also played no small part (during the years from 1790 to 1820) in luring planters to this favored region. Steam-driven machines for spinning and weaving the cotton had been started in England,² and the gin, a machine for performing the tedious task of separating the cotton fibre from the seed, instead of releasing slave hands from labor, increased the desire for cultivation and merely put those hands and many more to work on the cultivating and picking process. Immense estates were opened, stocks of slaves needed, and thus a sudden impetus was given to the slave trade. Nor was the enterprise of the New England States slow to perceive the prospect of rich gains to be made in supplying the demand for cheap negro labor.

Only a few years before these discoveries in machinery, all the colonies felt the advisability of doing away with slavery and thought that it would gradually die out. Leaders such as Franklin, Henry, Jefferson, and Jay showed their avowed hos-

² A History of the United States, by John Fiske, p. 310. 1797.

tility to the system. And in making the laws for the government of the Northwest Territory, there was but one dissenting voice³ against the clause prohibiting "involuntary servitude," and this was from a delegate from New York. Again, the convention which framed our constitution felt unanimously the need of putting a stop to the importation of slaves, though it is interesting here to note that Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, whose merchants were engaged in the business, joined with South Carolina and Georgia in insisting upon a few more years before the final prohibition.⁴ The date fixed upon was 1808. At the time when this prohibition went into effect, "the state of Rhode Island alone numbered fifty-four vessels engaged in the slave trade." All of the Thirteen Original States held slaves. But in the northern states the numbers were few, for there was no labor that a white man could not do better. No special sacrifice was required to gradually abolish slavery where Nature's stern laws forbade the negro's labor, nor was the exercise of any great philanthropy needed for a state like Vermont to emancipate her slaves⁵ when at the census of 1790 there were but seventeen in the whole state.⁶ How utterly different was the situation in Mississippi where, so far as we can ascertain the population that same year, there were upwards of 3,400 slaves, who constituted a part of the agricultural development of the state.

Finding the negro a part of the social system, the Mississippian, like other southern planters, sought to defend the institution in speech and through the press. Sermons were preached citing biblical authority: "Not condemned in Abraham"; "Sanctioned by the Decalogue"; "Not condemned by Christ and the Apostles—then not necessarily wrong." It was also confirmed and sanctioned by a constitution that they loved and honored. Was it not a necessary stage between savagery and

³ An Historical Sketch of Slavery from Earliest Periods, by T. R. R. Cobb, p. 170. 1858.

⁴ The Critical Period of American History, 1783-1789, by John Fiske, p. 264. 1897.

⁵ State Bill of Rights, 1777.

⁶ An Historical Sketch of Slavery from Earliest Periods, p. 171.

civilization? It inculcates "habits of industry, improves the physical man, tames wild propensities and passions," said a writer⁷ of Columbus, Mississippi (1846). "The savage man is necessarily inclined to indolence and inaction except when engaged in the chase and in war. No savage tribe has ever yet voluntarily betaken itself to habits of industry; consequently all that reach civilization must pass through the ordeal of slavery." Statistics, even before the year 1845, showed a greater number of negroes in the slave states, converted and admitted into the church, than had resulted in all the years of missionary labor in Africa. Educationally, he maintained, the slave was much benefitted. "Many put to trade make good mechanics. Most of the field hands become good farmers." "These are all important branches of education, for aptness in the use of tools and implements quickens the mental powers."⁸ "The negro in Africa is as ignorant to-day as he was a thousand years ago," says another Mississippi writer of the day,—“just so far as slavery in the United States is superior to African slavery as it exists in Africa to-day, just so much good has resulted from the slave-trade.”

In addition to these observations the planter reasoned: "Is not the negro peculiarly fitted for his station in life?"—his thick, oily, sunburnt skin that allows him to enjoy basking in a semi-tropical sun; his mental inferiority, proved by the fact that he has always been subservient to the white race, except where he outnumbered them so greatly as to leave no alternative; that he does not chafe in a condition of bondage as other peoples do, but is contented and care-free unless treated with cruelty as in the West Indies. "He knows he is not and never can be the white man's equal and in most cases does not even desire it."

The planters called attention to the benefits to the country at large due to the system: (1) Large tracts of land abounding in marshes and ponds would go to waste merely because no white man could be induced on account of the dangers to his constitution to undertake voluntarily to remove such sources of

⁷A Defence of Negro Slavery as it Exists in the United States, by Matthew Estes, p. 121.

⁸Ibid. p. 123.

diseases. The negro, on the contrary, is not anything like, to the same extent, subject to these diseases and can perform the labor without injury to his constitution. Thus the health of the country is materially improved. (2) "The products of slave labor constitute the basis of much of the wealth of this country and also of Europe." Great was the confidence in the cotton crop. "Destroy the production of cotton at the south and you will almost ruin Europe and America,"⁹ boasts the Mississippian. (3) "Slavery adds security and strength to the South in a military point of view."—The other side had been arguing that the slaves would join hands with any foe that invaded the country, but our Mississippi writer cites, among other instances, that of Lord Dunmore, governor of Virginia, who offered freedom and gold to the slaves of the state if they would join the British in fighting against their masters; but they remained faithful.

To these points of view were added the difficulties of emancipation. Very many of the Mississippi slave-owners looked upon slavery as a heavy responsibility and "longed to be rid of it, but they were not able to give up their young and valuable negroes, nor were they willing to set adrift the aged and helpless,"¹⁰ and in many instances they were deeply attached to them. As early as 1828, Gerard C. Brandon, the first native governor, realized slavery to be an incubus, and in his annual message said:¹¹ "Slavery is an evil at best, and has invariably operated oppressively on the poorer class of every community into which it has been introduced, by destroying that mutual dependence which would otherwise exist between the rich and the poor, and excludes from the state, in proportion to the number of slaves, a free white population through the means of which alone can we expect to take rank with our sister states." And again on the general subject of conditions, S. S. Prentiss of Natchez, Mississippi, wrote in 1831:¹² "To free the slaves,

⁹ *A Defence of Negro Slavery as It Exists in the United States*, p. 157.

¹⁰ *A Southern Planter*, Smedes, p. 149.

¹¹ *Mississippi* (an encyclopædia), by Dunbar Rowland, Southern Historical Publishing Association, Vol. II, p. 684. 1907. (See also Claiborne's *Mississippi as a Province, Territory and State*.)

¹² *Mississippi* (an encyclopædia), by Dunbar Rowland, Vol. II, p. 688.

and let them continue in the United States, would not, in my opinion, be any advantage to them; though if they could be transported to Africa again, it would be better. But it is impossible on account of their number—and even if they were all offered the privilege of going to Africa, I do not believe half of them would accept it. The sin of the business lies at the door of those who first introduced slavery into this country. The evil is now too deep-rooted to be eradicated.” Indeed, the legislature of Mississippi found it necessary to prevent the manumission of negroes who were to remain in the state, since a class between the slave and the owner made too discordant an element to be endured. The master disposed to free his slaves was thus compelled either to take them to the free states or send them to Africa. There was a growing feeling in favor of colonization, and instances are recorded of planters who went to great expense to transport their slaves across the ocean. In the early thirties, Judge Green of Adams County, Mississippi, emancipated by will one hundred and fifty negroes, “provided for their transportation, with one year’s provisions and medicines and a full supply of agricultural implements.” “His will,” adds Claiborne, the historian, “was faithfully carried out by his heirs-at-law, who were large slaveholders.”¹³ But for those who were unable to send their slaves to Africa, the only practical mode was to carry them beyond the state limits, emancipate, and leave them. Should the black man ever afterward be found in the state, he forfeited his freedom and was sold.

But to this was added another difficulty. As the number of free negroes increased in the non-slaveholding states, especially in the new states north of the Ohio, strict laws were passed against them. Indiana not only passed stringent laws preventing the entrance of negroes into her territory but also compelling “the early expatriation of those now (1851) resident on her soil.”¹⁴ Various other states, as Illinois, Iowa, and Delaware, passed discriminating laws against free negroes who wished to

¹³ Mississippi as a Province, Territory and State, by Claiborne, Vol. I, p. 388.

¹⁴ *De Bow's Review*, Dec. 1851—“Equality of the Races,” by John Campbell, of Philadelphia.

become citizens.¹⁵ These "Black Laws," as they were termed, required negroes to file certificates of freedom rigidly excluding them from the militia and from the public schools, and "no negro could testify against a white man." Thus many believed that emancipation, which set the thriftless and irresponsible negro adrift in an unwelcome community, was no kind service to him. In spite of the southern zeal for universal liberty, these men in truth and in sincerity believed slavery to be a boon to the African.

But those masters who viewed the institution in this light were the noble, fine-hearted men who made the interests of humanity their own and whose slaves usually came to them through inheritance. "It is true that the relations between the slaves and the families of their owners were frequently of such a character that no art, power, or persuasion could have been sufficiently potent to scatter their slaves or disrupt the family circles."¹⁶ Many trustworthy instances could be cited where masters emphatically refused to sell unless the purchaser was willing to take whole families. A New Englander who visited the South for the purpose of finding out conditions reports a conversation which he held with a trader who transported slaves from Washington and Alexandria to the Natchez market. I quote from his book: "In one instance he [the trader] remarked, they had purchased from one estate more than fifty negroes in order to prevent the separation of family connections; and in selling them, they had been equally scrupulous to have them continue together. In this case, however, they had sacrificed not less than one or two thousand dollars, which they might have obtained by separating them, as they would have sold much better in smaller lots."¹⁷ "Owners frequently refused

¹⁵ Even to-day, I am told by a resident of Cass County, Illinois, that there is such a strong feeling against them, that though there is no constitutional warrant for it, when a negro enters the county he is made to understand he had better get out within three days.

¹⁶ *Slavery and Slave-trade in the United States*, by Ethan Allen Andrews, 1836, p. 139.

¹⁷ *The Legal Status of Slaves in Mississippi before the War*, by W. W. Magruder (Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, Vol. IV, p. 141).

to sell negroes so as to part sisters attached to each other; but negroes related frequently preferred to be sold to different owners, so that they might have pretexts for visits."¹⁸

But that there were cruel cases of separation cannot be passed over. To quote again from the New England author in a conversation with another trader:¹⁹ "In selling slaves, Mr. N. assures me that he never separates families, but in purchasing them he is often compelled to do so, for that his business is to purchase, and must take such as are in the market. 'Do you often buy a wife without the husband?' 'Yes, very often, and frequently, too, they sell me the mother while they keep her children. Children from one to eighteen months old are worth about one hundred dollars. That fellow,' pointing to one about eighteen, 'I gave seven hundred and fifty for last night.'"

It was the report of the cruel features of the slave-trade that did most to anger abolitionists against the institution and bring about the final emancipation of the slave. In addition to this phase and the cruelty of a few tyrannical masters, who invariably lost social caste in their community, the "overseer" feature of slavery must be reckoned with. In Mississippi and other states of the River Basin, large "gangs of slaves" were under the charge of an overseer, who was instructed to make as large crops as possible.²⁰ Sometimes the planter resided at a distance and did not interfere with the authority of the overseer. In many instances the overseer was the most exacting and vindictive of rulers and converted an otherwise mild and obedient slave into "an obstinate, reckless rebel, fearing nothing, feeling nothing and caring for nothing."

"But," asks the inquirer, "were there no laws curbing the power of a cruel master or overseer and allowing the slave to appeal to the court?" In the first constitution adopted by the state, August 15, 1817, we find a clause²¹ "which provided that the Legislature might establish in each county a Court of Pro-

¹⁸ Mississippi (an encyclopædia), by Dunbar Rowland, Vol. II, p. 691.

¹⁹ Slavery and the Slave-trade in the United States, by E. A. Andrews, p. 147.

²⁰ Slavery and the Internal Slave Trade in the United States, p. 76. London: Thomas Ward & Co. 1841.

²¹ Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, Vol. II, p. 135.

bate, for the discharge of various enumerated functions and 'for the trial of slaves.'" This constitution also provided that "the Legislature should never have the power to deprive the slave of the right to an impartial trial by jury." Killing a slave was punishable with death in all the cotton-planting states. An instance is cited, 1846, by a resident of Lowndes County, Mississippi, of a wealthy man of the county who forfeited his bond of \$20,000 and fled the country rather than stand his trial for murdering one of his slaves, "though," adds the writer, "the proof was not conclusive that the murder was wantonly committed."²²

Further on in this same constitution we find that the Legislature is empowered to pass laws to oblige the owners of slaves "to treat them with humanity, to provide for them necessary clothing and provisions, to abstain from all injuries to them extending to life or limb." An avowed upholder of slavery²³ complains to his own people that "the negro houses in general are too small, too open for health." Some claim that the clothing of the slaves was wretchedly poor in Lower Mississippi and Louisiana and that the farther south in these states you go, the worse the conditions.²⁴ Also by later enactments, cruel and unusual punishments inflicted on slaves were forbidden by law.²⁵ When these laws were broken, the legislature had the power to sell the slave to a more humane master.

Some of the specific laws that were passed in these early days appear to us as most harsh and extreme. For a slave to "use abusive or provoking language to, or lift his hand in opposition to a white person," was an offence punishable with a maximum of thirty-nine lashes, according to the discretion of the owner. Yet no punishment was to be inflicted where it appeared to the justice that he was acting in self-defence. "The punishment varied all the way from ten stripes 'for presuming to come upon

²² A Defence of Negro Slavery as It Exists in the United States, by Matthew Estes, p. 125. 1846.

²³ Ibid., p. 254.

²⁴ Slavery and the Internal Slave Trade in the United States, p. 97. London: Thomas Ware & Co. 1841,

²⁵ Southern Slave Laws, Abstract of the Laws of Mississippi, by Alexander Clayton — *De Bow's Review*, Vol. VIII, p. 23.

the plantation of any person without leave from his master,' up to thirty-nine for grand and petty larceny" and in almost every case these lashes were to be "well laid on." Yet the negro was often whipped and turned loose for offences for which a white man would be imprisoned. "There was a white man not long since," says Estes,²⁶ "sent to the Mississippi penitentiary for stealing three dollars. He lay in jail several months before his trial came on, and was then found guilty and sentenced to the penitentiary for several years. I knew a slave in this very town taken up and whipped, then turned loose, for stealing a considerable amount of money. I could, were it necessary, give any number of such cases. The young man alluded to will never recover his lost character, but will ever feel the scorn, contempt and neglect of society. The negro is still in our community, and has not sustained the slightest loss of character that I am aware of. He looks as cheerful, sleek, and lively as ever."

For the graver offences, some of the punishments seem to us now extremely crude. But as Stone points out,²⁷ "we must not lose sight of the times in which they were effective." They "looked upon the criminal laws from a view-point radically different from that of to-day. The debtor's prison still existed in England,—the stocks and pillory were instruments of common use here and there,—the public whipping-post claimed its daily victims." In regard to the penalty for perjury, which was more severe than any other non-capital offences, no oath whatever was administered, but the witness was charged to speak the truth and the punishment for failure to do so was announced in clear terms before he gave his testimony,²⁸ "and if it be found hereafter that you tell a lie, and give false testimony in this matter, you must, for so doing, have both your ears nailed to the pillory, and cut off, and receive thirty-nine lashes on your bare back, well laid on, at the common whipping-post." "It did not conclude 'So help you God'." But it is of conse-

²⁶ *A Defence of Negro Slavery as It Exists in the United States*, by Matthew Estes, 1846, p. 125.

²⁷ *The Early Slave Laws in Mississippi*, by A. H. Stone (in *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, Vol. I, p. 136).

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 140.

quence to know that we can find no record to show that the punishment was ever resorted to.

Many of the minor laws, such as those forbidding a slave to keep dogs or stock or to cultivate a patch of cotton or corn for his own use, were popularly decreed unnecessary and severe, and were frequently disregarded.²⁹ We find many references to this. The slaves "are often allowed to raise hogs for themselves, and every thrifty slave has his pig pen and poultry house. Each family is allowed a plot of ground and the use of a team, for melons, potatoes, etc. In the cotton picking season all that they gather over the usual task of seventy-five or eighty pounds a day, they are rewarded for."³⁰ And another writer cites the instance "of a tall and lithe young woman" who was the best cotton picker at B——. "At Christmas, Nelly's share of the prize money was something over seventeen dollars."³¹

Besides these incentives to good work, the slaves were looked after in a moral and religious way. Selling liquor to them was a misdemeanor severely punished, and many a master could pride himself on never having a drunkard on his plantation. Trading on Sunday, for white man or black, was strictly forbidden by law. Places of public worship were provided in almost every community, and there an ordained white minister preached to them. The law forbade negroes to preach, except on their master's plantation with his consent. In many of the towns and communities, Sunday Schools were opened for them where they were freely taught.

Indeed, "a Southern Plantation, well managed, had nearly everything necessary to life done within its bounds."³² There were the tanners and the shoemakers, the blacksmiths, the carpenters, and the miller. In and about the house and the out-of-door kitchen, worked the house-servants, the seamstresses, the laundry-woman, the cook and little "darkies to do the chores." These busy workers prepared the meals and made the clothes for the numerous field-hands. The houses of these

²⁹ *DeBow's Review*, Dec. 1851, *Slave Laws of the Southern States—Mississippi*, by Col. H. W. Walter, Vol. XI, p. 620.

³⁰ Claiborne's *Mississippi as a Province, Territory and State*, p. 144.

³¹ *A Southern Planter*, by S. D. Smedes, p. 32.

³² *Ibid.* p. 47.

cotton pickers "were arranged on streets leading from the overseer's house as a common center." "Every house," writes Dunbar Rowland,³³ "had a large front room and a small shed room. The slave family always had a garden spot given for their own. They were taught the pride of ownership, and many families beautified their little homes with running vines and flowers. Their food was issued to them weekly from a big 'smoke-house' that was to be found on every Mississippi plantation. It was plain, wholesome, and substantial, and consisted of bread, meat, rice, and vegetables, molasses and milk." This writer on plantation life in Mississippi plainly evinces in his article that his sole purpose is to give a fair and truthful account of slavery as it existed in the state of Mississippi.

"It is admitted now that the state of servitude upon which the labor system of the South rested before the war had much in it that was cruel, revolting and oppressive, and it is also true that it had far more that was humane, generous, loving and sympathetic."³⁴ There was genuine truth in the saying current in Mississippi and elsewhere, "that the mistress of a plantation was the most complete slave on it."³⁵ The master, too, as a rule, was humane and sympathetic and was one of the most princely of men in adversity as well as in prosperity. Those not familiar with accounts of beneficent plantation life such as the world can never see again would do well to read Mrs. Smedes's *A Southern Planter*; for, to quote Gladstone's words, "It teaches a lesson, always useful, of caution to be observed, and of justice to be rendered, in passing judgment on the character, whether of an individual or of a class, which has had the misfortune to stand in association with a system justly condemned."

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³³ Plantation Life in Mississippi before the War (in Mississippi Historical Society Publications, Vol. III, p. 90).

³⁴ Ibid. p. 85.

³⁵ *A Southern Planter*, by S. D. Smedes, p. 150.